

The Evolution of Sonoma Coast Chardonnay

By [ERIC ASIMOV](#)

Published: August 2, 2010

CALIFORNIA chardonnays are not nearly what they once were. This makes me very happy.

Not so long ago, California [chardonnay](#) was thought of by many as a kind of litmus test. Your stance on the wines signified your position on cuisine, culture and, no doubt, politics, religion, the afterlife and the future of the environment. Yes, I exaggerate, but only to emphasize the confounding notion that one's taste in certain wines is occasionally viewed as emblematic of things far more meaningful.

California chardonnay was just such a polarizing wine because the predominant style in the 1990s was so exaggerated — a rich, heavy cocktail of tropical tutti-frutti flavors wrapped in oaky layers of buttered popcorn. The style had its devoted fans — still does, in fact. But those who did not favor the style, myself among them, criticized it for lacking the balance, refinement, subtlety and liveliness that defined great white wines from other places.

Such are the pull-and-push elements that compel oscillations in style and fashion. Vocal minorities on the edges compete to be heard, with the great mass in the center drawn first one way, then the other. Eventually a style evolves that seems natural, or at least unforced, and settles in for the long haul, less affected by the shouting on the fringes.

Quite possibly, California chardonnay has arrived at this point, especially in the Sonoma Coast appellation, which barely existed 20 years ago but is thriving today. In a recent tasting of 20 bottles of Sonoma Coast chardonnay, the wine panel found many variations in style but also some unifying features that made us wonder whether a sense of place for the Sonoma Coast was emerging.

For the tasting, Florence Fabricant and I were joined by Laura Maniec, director of wine and spirits for the B. R. Guest restaurant group, and Fred Dexheimer, whose company, Juiceman Consulting, advises restaurants on wine and spirits.

The Sonoma Coast itself is such a huge appellation that over-generalizing can be dangerous. It encompasses vineyards that are within sight of the Pacific Ocean and others that are many miles away, on the eastern side of Highway 101.

Even along the narrow swath of land close to the coast, numerous microclimates emerge, making vineyards around Annapolis to the north very different from vineyards on the ridges above Fort Ross in the appellation's western midsection, not to mention those to the south near Freestone and Occidental.

Nonetheless, with certain exceptions, we found most of the chardonnays emphasized citrus and mineral flavors rather than tropical fruit. The ones we liked best had richness, depth and a refreshing sense of acidity. Others battled the California bugaboos of heaviness, over-apparent alcohol and clunky oakiness.

These sorts of peaks and valleys are characteristic of emerging regions, especially one like the Sonoma Coast, where most of the vineyards were planted within the last 10 to 15 years and where so much is still experimental. Over all, our feeling about these wines was optimistic.

“Winemaking shows its hand here, but there were wines with a real sense of place,” Fred said.

For me, the major issues were energy and vivacity. Richness goes with the territory, but richness without energy leaves a wine heavy and flat, all texture but no life. The wines I liked best — like our No. 1 bottle, the 2006 Wildcat Mountain Vineyard from MacRostie — combined a purely Californian sense of intensity with a vivacious liveliness. Situated near the appellation’s eastern border, near the western edge of the neighboring Carneros appellation, the winery is closer to Napa Valley than to the Pacific. San Pablo Bay shore would be more accurate than Sonoma Coast.

All of our top wines showed the sort of energy we found in the MacRostie. It can make all the difference between finishing one glass and pouring another. The 2006 Freestone Ovation showed the creamy texture that many have come to expect of California chardonnay, balanced by lively acidity and flavors of minerals and citrus. Energy gave the deep, rich 2008 Peay, from up near Annapolis, a sense of welcome vibrancy, while it gave spice and balance to the concentrated 2008 Kistler Noisetiers.

While these were our favorites in the tasting, I should point out that several of what I believe are the top Sonoma Coast chardonnay producers were not represented among our 20 bottles, in most cases because we could not find the wines. These would include single-vineyard wines from Littorai, Rivers-Marie, Failla and Lioco.

Beyond our favorites, we consistently found oaky flavors that were too much for my taste but, as Laura pointed out, confirmed the expectations that many fans have for California chardonnay. That is, if you like and want more than a kiss of new oak in your chardonnay, then wines like the 2006 Chasseur and the 2008 Johnson Family will be right for you. The 2006 Andreen-Gale from Flowers and the 2008 CrossBarn from Paul Hobbs also showed a good bit of oak, although not as pronounced.

Among our top 10, we had two wines that I regarded as throwbacks. Sonoma-Cutrer set a template for chardonnays in the 1980s, becoming one of America’s favorite wines. Today, the 2006 Sonoma-Cutrer Sonoma Coast still shows the blend of tropical fruit, butter and oak that was so popular back then. It’s a well-made wine, but its style is not to my taste.

The 2007 Pahlmeyer chardonnay does not have the same sort of history — Pahlmeyer only planted its Sonoma Coast vineyard in 2002 — but its chardonnay is powerful, rich, buttery and bombastic in a '90s sort of way. If you like that style, you'll love this wine.

If it all sounds like something of a mixed bag, well, it is. But that's to be expected. The path of wine evolution is about as straight as the Pacific Coast Highway, which twists its way along the actual Sonoma coast. As it winds and doubles back, a meandering drive can be frustrating to those impatient to reach a destination.

Yet, just as the gorgeous vistas provide a remarkable, almost spiritual satisfaction, the journey of California chardonnay in its Sonoma Coast manifestation offers fascinating views of an unfolding style. It's not so much an arrival as an exploration.

Tasting Report: Exploring the Sonoma Coast

MacRostie Sonoma Coast

\$39

★★★ ½

Wildcat Mountain Vineyard 2006

Pure California, with richness, depth and citrus and floral flavors